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SUPER-TERROR

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It has become a truism to state that the world changed on September 11th, when more than 4,000 perished in the attacks on New York and Washington. What died that day were not simply unfortunate office workers, but also the sense of invulnerability North Americans felt from the radical politics of the Islamic world. Other regions of the globe have been touched repeatedly by wanton acts of savagery ostensibly committed in the name of religion and culture. And America has even seen the precursor to the recent attacks in the 1995 bombing of the underground garage of the World Trade Center. But the scale of that incident did not shake up the country as profoundly as did September 11th, even though the authors of the first attack claimed that their intent was to collapse one tower into the next.

Had more critical attention been focussed on the 1995 incident, a new and terrible threat to international security might have been identified and appropriate counter-measures put in place. After September 11th it is critical that policy-makers recognize the difference between grand acts of terror of which the World Trade Center may be only the first, and smaller-scale acts which by comparison seem more like a nuisance. Clearly, we are facing a new strain of politically-motivated violence - one that is quantitatively and qualitatively different from previous iterations of terrorism. The rise of 'super-terrorism' as a vehicle for political change will require a (re-)assessment of the motivations behind acts of violence, and therefore a (re-)appraisal of the policies, strategies, and tactics needed to combat them.

Terror and Super-terror

What are the critical differences between super-terrorism and the more 'conventional' strains of terrorism? A non-exhaustive list reveals variances in tactics and, more importantly, motivations.

Super-terrorism does have roots in national 'liberation'. It cannot be characterized as an insurgency against an occupying power. Unlike the long-standing struggles in Northern Ireland, the Basque country of Spain or the West Bank and Gaza, the mandate of the super-terrorist is not to expel an occupier; his focus is not local. Rather, he seeks to change the political balance of power in a region or even on a global scale. Although he will invoke nationalist themes in order to rally support from around the region, these themes will draw heavily on religion and culture, rather than historical ties to a specific piece of real estate. To be sure, Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network have made the removal of foreigners from the "holy lands" one of his stated objectives. But the land of greatest interest to him - Saudi Arabia - is not under occupation. The number of Westerners in the Kingdom is in the low thousands - a relatively small footprint given the Saudi population of 22 million. They live and work there at the invitation of a sovereign government. That invitation is subject to negotiation and can be revoked at any time.[1]

Super-terrorism employs tactics of mass destruction. Unlike conventional insurgencies, where targets are conspicuously representative of the occupying regime (ie. soldiers, politicians, government installations) the super-terrorist aims to create maximum carnage in order to maximize damage to the target nation's psyche. There are no 'innocent' bystanders; the latter are the targets. There is a even a willingness to sacrifice non-partisans in order to kill a few targets.[2] There can be no coded warning to authorities, allowing the evacuation of the target area, since only by graphically demonstrating the citizenry's sense of powerlessness will there be a desire on the latter's part to purchase its security by placating the super-terrorist. This does not require the use of weapons of mass destruction. September 11th illustrated the utility of mating non-military technologies (ie. commercial aircraft) with unconventional tactics (ie. the

conversion of aircraft into manned cruise missiles) resulting in a style of attack of which the target nation could scarcely have conceived.

Super-terrorism depends on transnational links to a greater degree than conventional terrorism. The latter may see groups with diverse objectives providing material or information assistance to each other on a casual basis.[3] By contrast, super-terror is made possible by the formation of more permanent links between groups with similar objectives. These 'mergers' allow super-terrorism to quickly establish logistical beach-heads which may otherwise have taken years to set up from scratch. Access to safe houses, additional sources of revenue, and knowledge of the 'security terrain' - including the counter-intelligence capabilities of local security forces - are immediately available to all partners in the new arrangement. In 1998 the Egyptian arm of Islamic Jihad was merging with Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, providing the latter with a foothold into Southeast Europe. The link was uncovered and the America CIA captured five members of Islamic Jihad who had been operating within a six-year-old terror cell in Albania and Kosovo - an area awash in weapons, drugs, illicit money, and ethnic Muslims angry at years of victimization by their Christian neighbours.[4]

Super-terrorists are not necessarily economically or socially disadvantaged. While many commentators point to economic deprivation as a source of violence, neither the authors nor the executors of super-terror inhabit the slums of the West Bank. While they may claim - with varying degrees of credibility - to be acting on behalf of those who do,[5] their effectiveness as super-terrorists depends on a relatively high level of education and professional status. The organizational, logistical, and intelligence/surveillance tasks which must be carried out demand leaders of some financial means. These individuals will have status in their communities, cloaking themselves in an aura of respectability and moderation. Educated, cosmopolitan businessmen are less obvious candidates for radical politics. Their professional duties will require them be able to move freely across borders, allowing them to exercise command and control over operations. The importance of this attribute should not be underestimated, as the ability of counter-intelligence organizations to eavesdrop on telephone calls, faxes, and electronic mail make face-to-face meetings - even through intermediaries - the safest way of orchestrating and directing acts of super-terror.

Similarly, the trigger-men must be comfortable operating in the target area. All terrorists seek to remain inconspicuous in their style of dress and everyday activities. But unlike the more conventional terrorists who most often live and work among their own communities, the super-terrorist will seek to establish himself among the target population. (The September 11th hijackers lived in the United States for periods ranging from months to years.) By earning its trust, he will be in a better position to seek out 'nodes' to attack, such as non-redundant human resources and infrastructure, and evaluate any security measures which might obstruct his activities. As the 1998 CIA operation in the Balkans revealed:

> [The operatives] had created what appeared to be a classic 'sleeper' cell: a self-sufficient group safely sheltering with a friendly community, simply awaiting a call from its leadership to begin terrorist activities and indeed a part of a far bigger and more dangerous Muslim terrorist organization that has now spread through the Balkans and much of Western Europe.[6]

If the super-terrorist is identified - either through a successful counter-intelligence operation or through a claim of responsibility - his existence will send shock waves through the target community. His neighbours will be inclined to suspect others of similar ethnic or cultural background. Thus his corrosive effect on society may last longer and be more profound that the (reparable) physical damage done in the actual attack.

Super-terrorists never conform to the classic 'rational actor' model, whereby one pursues one's objectives by taking calculated risks not involving assured death. Although the stated goals of he super-terrorist may seem quite rational (to him), his willingness to sacrifice himself (and non-partisans) puts him in a different category than the radical who plants explosives and departs the scene. This is critical to our understanding of the stakes involved in countering super-terror, as it represents a qualitatively different danger to Western society. The last major threat to the West came from the Soviet Union and its allies. At no time during the Cold War did the Warsaw Pact consider suicide as a means of achieving its political goals. While a Red Army soldier may have genuinely felt that he was doing his 'internationalist duty', he would surely have agreed that it was preferable to emerge from the struggle with his skin intact. For him, martyrdom was something to be avoided rather than embraced. In contrast, the morale of the super-terrorist is highest when all notions of self-preservation are jettisoned and he resigns himself to his fate.[7]

Super-terror and Political Change

The super-terror of September 11th stems from a radical strain of Islam, one that professes to redress Muslim grievances against an allegedly imperialistic and exploitative West. While not universally accepted as a legitimate expression of the aspirations of the Islamic world, super-terror nevertheless appeals to unfocussed anger of some Muslim and Arab nationalists. Each may harbour grudges against their own societies and their perversion by foreign (ie. American) cultures. Others may view such acts as an indirect means of getting even with the 'common enemy', Israel. Still others may (secretly) applaud it for more pragmatic reasons. When a significant segment of the population is either prohibited from engaging in everyday political activity, when opposition is banned or severely curtailed, or when election victories are denied, people are bound to despair. Extreme elements may feel com-

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pelled to launch an insurgency against the corrupt and irresponsible government.[8] They may even resort to super-terrorism, reasoning that the only way to focus sufficient attention of the problem is to internationalize it - specifically by striking at those whom they perceive to be obstructing political change. Such was undoubtedly the case in 1995 when members of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) hijacked an Air France airliner and prepared to fly it into the Eiffel Tower in Paris. French officials now believe that the intention was to protest France's silence on the nullification of the 1992 election results in Algeria, where a fundamentalist party had scored a stunning victory.[9]

What hinders Western understanding of this phenomenon is a key cultural difference between the largely secular West and the more religious Islamic world. (The author acknowledges that to suggest that one is secular and the other not may be an extrapolation of a more complex political reality. There are, after all, relatively secular Muslim countries in which socialism and/or pan-Arabism is the dominant, or at least most visible, ideology. There are also political parties in the West with Christian antecedents.) The point to be made is that most Western societies are founded on the principle of the separation of church and state. By contrast, religion and political life are not so bifurcated in the Muslim world. Iran is one example of a state in which religious leaders exercise political control, and where legislation must pass a theocratic test before it is enacted. In other countries, fundamentalist groups have acted as surrogates for the resource-poor State in areas such as education and healthcare. This could include establishing maddrassas, or religious schools, where basic knowledge is imparted to the young along with, and in the context of a (sometimes volatile) mixture of religion and politics. To be sure, there are Western faith-based non-governmental organizations which provide similar services in the developing world. Few, however, would accuse them of preaching a world view which encourages the young and old to wage war against those outside the faith. This in contrast to the efforts of bin Laden and others to portray the Western presence in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East as a latter-day Crusade.[10]

Nevertheless, Islam is a political force whose power to rally people either for or against a certain country, grouping of countries, policy, or value system has been grossly underestimated in the West. It will piggyback on the notion that there is an 'Islamic interest' - that the Muslim world, like the Western one, can have common cause on a number of issues. Like the super-terrorist, it will make use of common yet effective technologies, such as the cell phone and the internet to spread information and reinforce Muslim identity. In recent years, these efforts have taken on a new dimension with the establishment of the Middle East's first private news network, *al-Jazeera*. Dubbed the 'Arab CNN', the Qatar-based network offers a wide variety of news and commentary from an Arab point of view. It has acquired a degree of notoriety among conservative Persian Gulf rulers who seek to control the flow of information through the state broadcast agencies. More recently, US officials have quietly pressed for its closure after it broadcast messages of scorn and defiance from Osama bin Laden. For many citizens of the Arab world, allegations of corruption among the region's power elites, and images of American weapons being used against Palestinian political activists will serve to reinforce that belief that only by embracing an Islamic identity can they mobilize the wherewithal to deal decisively with corruption from within and unwelcome interference from without. The Islamic 'antidote' to the region's ills will, at its most enlightened, involve efforts to democratize the political process. At its worst, and as shown by the events of September 11th, it may involve acts of super-terror.

Although the most radical brand of Islam enjoy only minority support, the sheer size of the Muslim world - stretching from Morocco to Indonesia - means that the number of converts to it is potentially vast. There is also a growing body of evidence which suggests that it has spread to the middle and upper classes of 'moderate' Muslim countries.[11] Visible manifestations of this may be confined to sympathy for and understanding of the motivations behind super-terrorism, rather than for the act itself. It may also take the form of criticism of the West's alleged heavy-handedness with Muslim countries.[12] But as views of the September 11th attacks span the entire political spectrum - from absolute condemnation to absolute praise - it stands to reason that alongside the 'moderates' who offer qualified condemnation, there are those who also do so, but covertly support those committed to violence as a way of facilitating political change. This is consistent with the theory of super-terrorism.

Countering Super-terror

It is beyond the scope of this paper to review all the political, economic, legal and military resources which can be brought to bear against super-terrorism. At the time of writing, the United States had waged a largely successful military campaign against the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Having failed to persuade the latter to hand over Osama bin Laden, the chief architect of the September 11th attacks, Washington waged a conventional war against the Afghan regime. While this counter-terror strategy has few precedents, the reasoning behind it is simple enough. By toppling a government which not only sheltered the ring-leader, but hosted an extensive training infrastructure which turned out both individuals and cadres committed to the violent re-ordering of the national and international political landscape, the US could rob the present and future super-terrorists of their preferred base of operations. It could also deter other regimes from giving succour to militants.

Other instruments have acquired a higher level of importance since Sep-

tember 11th. The anthrax scare in the US has heightened public awareness of the need for a robust civil defence against weapons of mass destruction. This will include the military's own nuclear, biological, and chemical defence units acting in co-operation with public health and disease control authorities.

Notwithstanding the utility of certain military capabilities, countering the super-terrorist is still very much a non-military activity. The first lines of defence continue to be intelligence and counter-intelligence agencies which detect and thwart threats abroad and at home. Their efforts will be buttressed be law enforcement agencies at various levels of government who will be asked to seek and detain suspects, or lend support to emergency services if the orders to arrest suspects come too late.

But while physical infrastructure and terror cells are relatively easy to destroy, it is much harder to combat the intangible forces which gave rise to them. Ideas of how the Muslim world should be ordered, and perverted perceptions of Western intentions have no body to kill. They must be met with a mixture of a sustained information campaign and, where practicable, changes to foreign policy. The former is critical to isolating the militants from the moderates, and can succeed only if allegations of anti-Islamic behaviour by the West (and in particular by the US) are countered by citing the latter's efforts in Balkans, Somalia, and ten years of the most intensive diplomacy to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

An enlightened foreign policy is also essential. More energy will be required to establish a Palestinian state, as the super-terrorist will not be able to maintain sufficient levels of support for his activities in a climate of peace. In addition, basic political rights and socio-economic needs must be met if they are not to fall under the influence of those proposing radical solutions to radical conditions. Encouraging democratic reforms does, admittedly, heighten the possibility of fundamentalist parties taking power and using the organs of the state to make mischief. But democratization also involves the establishment of a civil society composed of a viable opposition and free media which together can obstruct the radicalization of policy.

While the efficacy of these measures should not be under-estimated, so too should they not be over-estimated. Super-terrorism, by virtue of its unique character, may be less susceptible to the settlement of the Mid-East's most intractable land dispute. Unlike his counterparts in Northern Ireland or Spain, the super-terrorist may not close up shop if one of his professed objectives is met. He may derive self-confidence from his 'contribution' to the change to the political landscape. His stature among those he professes to lead may be enhanced to the point where he believes in his own infallibility and invincibility. He will conclude, perhaps rightly, that he is a political force to be reckoned with, and that his activities must continue should his people, if not his 'identity', come under threat again. Sadly, he may be with us for some time.

Notes

1. The original deployment of US forces to Saudi Arabia following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 occurred only after Saudi authorities requested US protection. Recently, the Saudi government has said that it may review its relations with the US over the latter's failure to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

2. The 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania killed more Africans – many of whom were Muslim – than Americans.

3. Two 'conventional' terrorist groups, the Provisional IRA and the defunct Baader-Meinhof Gang, are/were both regionally based. The former was founded on national liberation and concerned with territorial objectives, its activities directed against a single state. The latter had ideological (ie. Marxist-Leninist) underpinnings, and was concerned with the overthrow of capitalism in West European states - especially in its native Germany - in the 1970s.

4. Richard Bennett, "The CIA: Rolling Back the Years." *AFI Research Newsletter*, 22 November, 2001.

5. While Osama bin Laden has repeatedly lamented decades of Muslim 'humiliation', he has rarely invoked the name of the Palestinians. Ironically, the attacks he has orchestrated occurred at a time when US diplomacy aimed at resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was most active.

6. Bennett.

7. Corrina Schuler, "Probing the mind of a suicide bomber". *National Post*, 10 November 2001, A18.

8. Alessandro Bruno, "How Has Radical Islam Become the Most Popular Form of Political Opposition in the Islamic World?" *Strategic Datalink*, The Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, December 2001, 3.

9. Interview with Mr. Dominique Moisi, Institut francais pour les relations internationales (IFRI), Paris, 25 October, 2001.

10. "Never the twain shall peacefully meet"? *The Economist*, November 17-23 2001, 19.

11. Margaret Wente, "Muslim matrons of jihad". *The Globe and Mail*, 10 November 2001, A21. See also "Why do they hate us?" *Christian Science Monitor*, 15 November, 2001.

12. Alice Thomson, "The real damage has been done outside Afghanistan". *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 November, 2001

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